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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001835

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL OSCE TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY: INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE BASKIN ORAN

CHALLENGES STATUS QUO, TAKES ON TABOOS

REF: A. ANKARA 0404

1B. ANKARA 1439

1.(SBU) Summary: Intellectuals, leftists, minorities, and independent thinkers' enthusiastic support for retired Ankara University Professor Baskin Oran's independent candidacy in Istanbul's 2nd district has skyrocketed the neophyte politician to national prominence and made him a front-runner in Istanbul. In a recent conversation, Oran told us he is optimistic that he will get the approximately 60-70,000 votes needed to win a seat in the district, and attributes his popularity to the groundswell of support from civil society and "Turkey's voiceless" -- Kurds, minorities, gypsies, women, youth, gays, handicapped, and environmentalists. Oran's refusal to affiliate with a political party and willingness to speak out on previously taboo topics make him unique, and one to watch if voters give him a seat in parliament. End summary.

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Outspoken Academic Seeks to Represent Turkey's Voiceless

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2.(SBU) Retired Ankara University professor Baskin Oran was little-known outside academic circles until becoming an early target of rising nationalism when he was prosecuted in 2004 for writing a GOT-sponsored report that recommended Turkey improve the rights of its non-Muslims (ref A). Oran, never one to shy away from speaking his mind, has remained in the public eye since. When he publicly condemned the ultranationalist forces responsible for the assassination of his close friend Hrant Dink, he attracted further attention and had to be placed under police protection due to multiple death threats.

3.(SBU) In a recent conversation, Oran told us that until recently he had planned to continue his routine: living with his wife in his humble Ankara home, occasionally traveling in Turkey and abroad to speak on political issues, writing columns, articles and books, and maintaining his website. Several months ago, he began to receive calls and emails from hundreds of friends, students, and acquaintances urging him to run as an independent. They told him that no party represented their interests. Oran decided it was his duty as a citizen to make a difference by representing "those who have been alienated, rejected, restricted, silenced, pained, or been threatened by the paranoia that Turkey will be broken

up." He said he will be the voice of the voiceless: women, gays, Kurds, minorities, gypsies.

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Strong Grass-roots Support Gives Oran a Shot  
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4.(SBU) Oran decided to run in Istanbul's Second District (Beyoglu Besiktas, Alibeykoy, and Sarıyer) because of its large concentration of liberal-minded voters. Despite the 43 other independent candidates running in the district, he is confident he will get the 60-70,000 votes needed to win a seat. He attributed his popularity and well-run campaign to extraordinary grass-roots support. A small army of volunteers and private donors have allowed him to run an impressive campaign on par with those of candidates from major parties. Among the support: 6500 donors gave between 10 YTL and 1000 YTL; his political advisers work for free; a backer donated minibus transportation for him to traverse the 10 sub-provinces in Istanbul's 2nd district; one of Istanbul's largest printing houses printed hundreds of thousands of banners and brochures for him at no cost; and well-known film directors such as Ezel Akay and Melek Taylan shot his videos and advertisements.

5.(SBU) Turkish civil society members have rallied behind Oran's candidacy. Writers Yasar Kemal and Adalet Agaoglu, both Oran supporters, said in recent interviews that for the first time they feel like they have someone to actually vote for in the election. Kurdish-origin writer Mehmet Uzun said that Oran and Mehmet Ufuk Uras, an independent candidate in Istanbul's first district, represent "the voice of Turkey." Dozens of Embassy human rights and civil society contacts in Ankara have told us in recent weeks that they are

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disappointed they have no broad-minded candidate like Oran in their district.

6.(SBU) Comment: Although Oran's candidacy is part of the wider election trend of running as an independent to circumvent the 10 percent threshold (see ref B), his is unique. He is not affiliated with any political party and consistently speaks out on previously taboo topics in Turkey, such as the Kurdish problem, Turkish-Armenian history, and the rights of minorities and gays. The impressive support and attention he has received exemplifies the dynamism of these elections. Should Oran gain a parliamentary seat, his independence and outspokenness will make him an interesting MP to watch.

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